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Implicating trust in the innovation process

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the development of two new measures of innovation trust, 'trust that heard' and 'trust that benefit'. We report the findings from their use in a survey of design engineers in two large aerospace companies. We test a range of hypotheses covering different plausible roles for trust and confirm a 'main effects' model, whereby the variables predict the number of ideas suggested and the number of ideas implemented. In addition, we replicate earlier findings by Axtell et al. (2000), namely that personal and job variables predict idea suggestion, whilst organisational variables predict implementation.

The concept of trust has been used in fields as diverse as economics, sociology, management, social psychology and occupational psychology. However, despite the prevalence of the construct, trust has not previously been proposed as a predictor of individual innovation. This paper examines the role of aspects of trust in the innovation process.

Trust is usually defined as a willingness to accept vulnerability based upon having positive expectations about other people's intentions and behaviours in situations which are interdependent and/or risky (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998). However, disciplinary diversity has meant that there is no universally-accepted operationalisation of trust. Whilst this may be viewed by some as a limitation, it is widely acknowledged that these differences are not only necessary, but also potentially valuable. Bigley and Pierce (1998) state that, "efforts to incorporate existing trust perspectives under one conceptualization are likely to result in concepts that are either unreasonably complex or inordinately abstract for organizational science research purposes. In addition, attempts to force disparate approaches together may result in misapplications of previous approaches" (p.415). They argue for a problem-centred approach in which the particular components of trust are specific to the context of study, in this case innovation. We agree. Thus, whilst subscribing to the broad definition above, we believe that a specific, innovation-focused operationalisation is needed. Our 'local' definition of innovation trust, then is: an expectancy of reasonable and positive reactions by others in response to individual innovation attempts. Our underlying logic is that people are more likely to make efforts to innovate (by creating ideas and helping implement them) when they hold expectancies of reasonable and positive responses by others.

Our thinking has been influenced by three related strands of research. First, Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa (1986) used a social exchange perspective to argue that employees form global beliefs about the extent to which the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being. They found that these beliefs were positively related to the constructiveness of anonymous suggestions made by employees (Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). Second, Siegel and Kaemmerer (1978) investigated the climate present in innovative organisations, and identified a main factor which they labelled support for creativity. Subsequently, Anderson and West (1997) found that a modified version of this factor was predictive of innovation. And third, Cook and Wall (1980) developed measures of interpersonal trust at work, focusing primarily on confidence in the ability of others (both peers and superiors) and on faith in the intention of others (again both peers and superiors).

The work described in this paper draws intellectually on these sets of ideas, as well as on our own experiences of undertaking research and development in organisations trying to innovate. We propose that innovation trust plays an important role in the innovation process. More specifically, we hypothesise that people are more likely to engage themselves in the innovation process to the extent that they believe their ideas and suggestions will be listened to, and to the extent that they believe that they will share in any subsequent benefits that accrue. Because engagement in innovative behaviours involves effort and risk, they are unlikely to do this if they do not trust that they will be listened to, or share in the benefits.

These elements of trust are different in their emphasis to existing conceptualisations. The nearest related construct was that developed by Cook and Wall

(1980) in their measure of 'faith in management'. The three items used in that measure were: "Management at my firm is sincere in its attempt to meet the workers' point of view"; "I feel quite confident that the firm will always try to treat me fairly"; and "Our management would be quite prepared to gain advantage by deceiving the workers" (reverse scored). The difference in our conceptualisation is deliberate – we have sought to include two new and more specific aspects of trust, directly relevant to the innovation domain. To the best of our knowledge, this conceptualisation is novel, both in its development and in its empirical application to the innovation domain.

To test these ideas we developed specific measures of two aspects of trust for innovation. The scale was developed as a short measure, suitable for inclusion in a larger questionnaire. This approach is similar to that adopted by others working in this area. The measure comprises two factors, each measured using separate sub-scales: 1) an expectancy that the organisation takes one's ideas and suggestions seriously – labelled as 'trust that heard'; and 2) an expectancy that those managing the organisation have one's interest at heart, and that one will share in the benefits of any changes – labelled as 'trust that benefit'.

In the present study innovation is defined as a process involving the generation and implementation of new ideas, practices or artefacts within an organisation (van de Ven, Angle & Poole, 1989). Following Axtell, Holman, Unsworth, Wall, Waterson and Harrington (2000) and Unsworth (2000), we especially focus on two distinct aspects of the innovation process, i.e., idea generation and idea implementation.

A wide range of other factors have been implicated in the innovation process. These include: personal characteristics (e.g., job competence, creativity – see Amabile

and Gyskiewicz, 1989; Farr and Ford, 1990); job characteristics (e.g., job control, job complexity -- Oldham and Cummings, 1996); and organisational characteristics (e.g., team support for innovation, management style -- Anderson and West, 1998; Anderson and King, 1993). Furthermore, Axtell et al. (2000) found that personal and job characteristics affected the suggestion of ideas, whilst organisational factors influenced the implementation of ideas. They argued that suggestion making is more likely to be affected by personal abilities, as well as the opportunity to make suggestions afforded by greater job control and role breadth. Implementation, on the other hand, is likely to be dependent on others, and thus more likely to be dependent on social factors such as the support of team members and management.

In order to explore the role of trust as a predictor of idea suggestion and implementation in more depth, we also included in our study some personal, job and organisational variables previously identified as important predictors of individual innovation. These variables were included for two reasons, first to act as controls – we need to determine whether or not the trust variables add anything extra to our understanding of innovation. And second, we took the opportunity to try to replicate the work of Axtell et al. (2000), to examine whether or not different classes of variables predict different parts of the innovation process.

Specifically we included thinking style (a personal characteristic – see Jabri, 1990; Scott & Bruce, 1994), role breadth (a job characteristic – see Parker, 1998), and two organisational variables, namely leadership style (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Scott & Bruce, 1994), and organizational support for innovation (Anderson & West, 1997; Scott & Bruce, 1994). If trust is indeed of predictive utility for individual innovation as

we argue, it will have an effect over and above these personal, job and organisational factors, which have previously been linked to innovation.

Our main intention then is to implicate the role of trust in the innovation process since it seems to us entirely plausible that trust has a role. However, we also wish to explore what that role might be – predictor, moderator or outcome. Our preferred model, based on the previous literature, and on our own fieldwork experiences, is that trust is a predictor of innovation. Thus, people who trust that they will be heard and that they will benefit, engage in the innovation process (both by making suggestions and by promoting implementation) – those who do not trust in these issues do not engage.

A second possibility is that aspects of trust could operate as moderators at different stages in the innovation process. Both trust that heard and trust that benefit could moderate the relationship between personal/ job variables and idea suggestion. For example, those people experiencing role breadth are likely to suggest ideas, but only when they trust that they will be heard or if they believe that they will benefit. On the hand, the organisational variables may be moderated in their impact on implementation by trust that benefit. For example, support for innovation will influence implementation, but only when people trust that they will benefit. Similarly, the relationship between suggestions and implementation may be moderated by trust that benefit – again people will only put effort into implementation if they believe they will benefit.

And finally, trust that heard and trust that benefit could be outcomes of innovation. Thus, for example, it could be the actual implementation of an idea that leads people to believe that they will be heard, and that leads people to find out directly whether or not they benefit.

As well as examining the potential role of these trust variables, we also attempted to replicate the distinctions made by Axtell et al. (2000). We hypothesised that individual and organisational variables have impacts at different stages in the innovation process.

Thus, on the basis of Axtell et al. (2000), we hypothesise that:

H1. Individual and job variables predict idea suggestion.

H2. Organisational variables predict idea implementation.

H3. Idea suggestion predicts idea implementation.

Turning to our measures of trust, we further hypothesize that:

H4. Both trust that heard and trust that benefit predict idea suggestion.

H5. Both trust that heard and trust that benefit predict idea implementation.

In addition, trust could act as a moderator variable, and we specifically hypothesise that:

H6. Both trust that heard and trust that benefit moderate the relationship between individual/ job variables and idea suggestion.

H7. Trust that benefit moderates the relationship between organisational variables and idea implementation.

H8. Trust that benefit moderates the relationship between idea suggestion and idea implementation.

Finally, we examine the role of the trust variables as outcomes of innovation and we hypothesise that:

H9. Trust that heard and trust that benefit are predicted by idea implementation.

Several path models were developed to test the above hypotheses and these are described in more detail in the results section. What is important to note at this stage is

that our preferred model combines hypotheses 1 to 5 and interprets trust that heard and trust that benefit as predictors of both suggestions and implementations.

Method

Participants and Measures

After a series of pilot interviews, 250 design engineers from two large aerospace organisations were asked to complete a questionnaire. Of these, 128 were returned (an overall response rate of 51% -- 41% from one company, 58% from the other).

The following measures were used. Systematic and intuitive thinking styles were measured using Jabri's Thinking Style Inventory (comprising 10 and 9 items respectively). (Sample items – "I am a person who follows well-trodden ways and generally accepted methods for solving problems" and "I am a person who searches for novel approaches not required at the time").

Role breadth self-efficacy, an indicator of the respondent's confidence in performing proactive activities beyond the prescribed scope of the job, was measured using an adaptation of Parker's (1998) scale (7 items, sample item: "How confident would you feel designing new procedures for your work area?"). Support for innovation was measured using an adaptation of the Team Climate Inventory developed by Anderson and West (1997), adapted to match the original organisation-level orientation suggested by Siegel and Kaemerrer (1978) (8 items, sample item: "In this organisation, time is given to develop new ideas"). The leader-member exchange measure by Dansereau, Graen & Haga (1975) was used as a single scale (14 items, sample item "To what extent does your supervisor allow you to participate in decisions affecting you"). Two sub-scales relating to the dimensions of innovation trust were developed for this

study. The final items, comprising three items for the first sub-scale and two for the second, are listed in table 1.

(Table 1 about here)

Innovation was measured using both the number of ideas suggested and the number implemented, using scales adapted from Borrill et al (1998). The measure of ideas suggested comprised 7 items (sample: “To what extent have you suggested new work targets/ objectives?”). The measure of ideas implemented comprised 10 items (sample: “To what extent have your suggestions of new work targets/ objectives been implemented?”).

Responses to all the above scales were obtained on appropriate 5-point scales. All measures in this study involve self-report. A full set of items is available on request from the first author.

Results and summary

We describe the results in three parts: the factor analyses of the trust scales; the reliabilities and inter-correlations of all the variables in the study; and the specific tests of the various hypotheses using path analyses.

Factor analyses

The results of the factor analysis are presented in table 1. As predicted, two clean factors were derived (attaining eigenvalues > 1.00 -- Kaiser 1960). These results provide support for the construct validity of the trust scale (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991).

Differences between the two organisations participating in the study on the two trust factors derived from the exploratory factor analysis were further tested. Absence of significant difference in the inter-correlation between the two trust dimensions in the two organisations would provide some support for scale consistency and generalisability across different contexts. The product-moment correlation between the two trust dimensions was $r = .53$ ($p < 0.001$) in Company 1 and $r = .34$ ($p < 0.001$) in Company 2. Applying the formula for testing the difference between correlations in independent samples (Guilford & Fruchter, 1978), we found the difference in the coefficients to be non significant ($z = 1.23$, ns).

Given that all the variables in this study were measured using self-report scales, there is a risk that findings can be attributed to common method variance. To test for common method variance bias in our study, we included in the same exploratory factor analysis all items for all the variables of interest and examined whether all items could be explained by one single factor (Harman, 1976). Results indicated that our variables could not be explained by a single factor, therefore suggesting that common method variance was not an important problem in this study. We return to this issue in our discussion.

Reliability and Correlation analyses

The correlation matrix is presented in table 2, along with the alpha coefficients. All (bar one) of the measures in this study and, in particular in the context of this paper, both of the trust scales, demonstrate good internal consistency, ranging from .73 to .92, thereby exceeding the lower level of reliability estimates (.70) recommended by Nunally

(1978). The single exception was the measure of Intuitive thinking style (.62) which was dropped from further analyses.

The innovation outcomes (suggestions and implementations) are highly correlated with many of the predictor variables. This is as we would expect given that these variables were selected for inclusion in the study on the basis of previous research linking them with innovation. Also as predicted, the two measures of innovation trust do correlate significantly with the extent to which ideas were suggested and implemented. They also correlate significantly with support for innovation, indicating convergent validity. Also as we would predict, the measures of trust do not correlate significantly with systematic thinking style, indicating divergent validity.

(Table 2 about here)

Path analyses

We next tested for the predictive utility of the trust construct for individual innovation (both suggestions and implementations). Path analyses were conducted using EQS 5.7a for Windows (Bentler, 1995). Alternative theory-based models were tested against the hypothesised path model (following James, Mulaik & Brett, 1982; Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First a main effects path model (Model 1), which is the preferred model of this study, was tested incorporating hypotheses 1 to 5. Three other models, nested to the main effects one, were tested. The first was a saturated model (Model 2), which included all paths, whether hypothesised or not -- this is an important baseline model. The second was more restricted than the main effects model – in this all paths from the trust dimensions to innovation outcomes are constrained to zero (Model 3). In order to establish that the trust constructs contribute significantly and are of predictive

utility for innovation, this model should have significantly worse fit than the hypothesised model. And third, a null model (Model 4), another important baseline model, was tested – this assumed no relation between the variables in the study.

In order to test the role of trust as a moderator in the innovation process (Hypotheses 6-8), two interaction models were tested. Model 5 incorporated hypotheses 1 to 7, thereby including the specified main effects (H1 to 5) as well as the first two proposed interaction effects (H6 and 7). Model 6 included hypotheses 1 to 5 and hypothesis 8, thereby including the specified main effects (H1 to 5) as well as the third proposed interaction (H8). The reason for our testing two interaction models instead of one has to do with our small sample size which makes power an issue and causes problems of non-convergence (e.g., Hayduk, 1987).

Finally, Model 7 examines the proposition that trust that heard and trust that benefit are outcomes of implementation (rather than predictors) (Hypothesis 9). Model 7 incorporated Hypotheses 1 to 3 and hypothesis 9.

Model comparisons are presented in Table 3. Several fit indices were used in order to test model fit including absolute fit indices (we specifically used chi-square and RMSEA), incremental or comparative fit indices (NNFI) and parsimonious fit indices (CFI) (see Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998).

(Table 3 about here)

The main effects trust model (model 1) fits the data well. All indices of fit fall within levels of acceptability. It also provides a better explanation when compared with the more restricted models (Model 3 and Model 4) (as indicated by the significant χ^2 differences). The improvement of model 1 over model 4 (the null model) is unsurprising.

But the improvement of model 1 over model 3 (where the trust variables are constrained to zero) is most important for this study since this demonstrates the importance of trust in the innovation process over and above several previously established variables. There is, however, a significant difference between the main effects model (Model 1) and the saturated model (Model 2): $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 10.92, p < .05$. This suggests that there is some mis-specification in the proposed model. Since the use of Modification Indices for model improvement is considered highly controversial in the structural equation modelling literature (e.g., Kline, 1998; Schumacker & Lomax, 1998), we decided not to re-specify our model. Despite the observed mis-specification, our model has a good fit to the data since all fit indices fall within the levels of acceptance and it is better than all the more restricted models tested.

Furthermore, although we cannot directly compare the preferred model (Model 1) with either the interaction models (Models 5 and 6), or the model the trust variables are outcomes of innovation (Model 7), (because the models are not nested), inspection of the fit indices of the three models clearly indicates that the main effects model (Model 1) has the best fit.

We therefore conclude that this is a plausible model. Path coefficients for Model 1 are presented in Figure 1.

(Figure 1 about here)

Relating these to our hypotheses, we find that:

- systematic thinking style (negatively) and role breadth self-efficacy both predict idea suggestion (and not implementation) (confirming H1);
- support for innovation and leadership style predict implementation (and not idea

- suggestion) (confirming H2);
- idea suggestion predicts idea implementation (confirming H3);
 - trust that benefit predicts idea suggestion, but trust that heard does not (part confirming H4 and discussed below);
 - trust that heard predicts implementation, but trust that benefit does not (part confirming H5 and discussed below).
 - there is no evidence that the trust variables act as moderators (H6, 7 and 8);
 - there is no evidence that trust that heard or trust that benefit are outcomes of implementation (H9).

Overall then, the findings support our preferred model in two senses. The data replicate the findings of Axtell et al. (2000) (as in hypotheses 1 to 3). And furthermore, trust is implicated in the innovation process as a main effect (hypotheses 5 and 6). However, the path coefficients indicate a differential role for the two trust constructs in relation to innovation suggestions and implementation. More specifically, we found that ‘trust that benefit’ is associated with the suggestion of ideas, whilst ‘trust that heard’ is associated with their implementation.

Our results suggest that when employees believe they will share the benefits they make more suggestions, but this belief has no effect on whether their ideas are actually implemented. On the other hand, employee trust that the organisation will listen to them has a direct effect on ideas implementation but not on the suggestions they make. Our interpretation is that employees need to believe they will benefit to make the effort of contributing by suggesting ideas – if this is not the case, then they will not make that investment. On the other hand, it is trust that heard that predicts implementation. One

potential explanation is that the more an individual feels they are listened to and taken seriously, the more effort they put into having their suggestions implemented. The findings can be interpreted in a similar manner to those by Axtell et al. (2000). Thus trust that benefit may operate on a personal level linked with the perception of personal outcomes and rewards, while trust that heard is likely to be more dependent on others and therefore can be considered as an organisational variable. More empirical work is required to test and develop these ideas further.

Before concluding we should draw attention to the main limitations of this study. There are three main issues. First, all the measures in this study were undertaken using self-report. We accept that this is a potential weakness, but it does not explain our particular pattern of findings and the confirmation of our preferred hypotheses. If the results were heavily influenced by common method variance we would expect to observe a less differentiated set of results. This, of course, is not to argue that future studies would not benefit from the inclusion of objective measures.

Second, the data are all cross-sectional in design. This is a weakness that obviously limits our ability to make 'causal' claims. This needs correction with longitudinal research designs, but again this limitation does not invalidate our major claim that trust is implicated in the innovation process.

And third, the measures of trust in this study are brief (2 and 3 item) sub-scales. Whilst this is not unusual for sub-scale measures (for example, see Cook and Wall, 1980), this is an undoubted weakness. Our view however is that we have demonstrated the potential importance of these aspects of trust, and we should use this work as the basis on which to develop and test more substantial measures.

In summary, the present findings replicate the findings by Axtell et al. (2000) distinguishing between different predictors of different stages of the innovation process. More importantly, however, we also have found that elements of trust are implicated in the innovation process, probably acting as a main effect. Whilst this seems highly plausible, to the best of our knowledge this is the first time such issues have been empirically demonstrated in this area.

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Table 1. Factor analysis^a of the trust in innovation scale

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. Do you believe your ideas and suggestions are taken seriously?	.98	---
2. Do you believe your ideas and suggestions are listened to?	.95	---
3. Do you believe you will take credit for any new ideas and suggestions?	.55	---
4. Do you think those managing change in your company have your interests at heart?	---	.85
5. Do you think that you share in the benefits of any changes that are made in your working environment?	---	.90
% Variance	55.5	23.13
Eigenvalue	2.77	1.16
Total Variance = 78.63%		

^a Factor analysis using principal components extraction and oblimin rotation